



News Release



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National Marine Fisheries Service

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Fish and Wildlife Service

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CORPS OF ENGINEERS TOLD CHANNEL DEEPENING WON'T JEOPARDIZE FEDERALLY PROTECTED FISH AND WILDLIFE

Deepening the Columbia River channel will not jeopardize threatened and endangered fish and wildlife, according to biological opinions released today by the two federal agencies responsible for the species' protection. The findings allow the Army Corps of Engineers to proceed with a supplemental environmental impact statement addressing the proposed project's broader environmental issues.

The opinions from the National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are part of the scrutiny the \$188 million navigation project is subject to under the federal Endangered Species Act. The project, which would deepen the 103-mile channel between Astoria and Portland from its current 40-foot minimum depth to 43 feet, also must undergo a variety of other state and federal environmental reviews.

"We've taken a very thorough look at the project's effects," said Bob Lohn, regional administrator for the fisheries service's Northwest office in Seattle. "The best science available to us shows that this project will not jeopardize listed species."

In 2000, the fisheries service withdrew an earlier biological opinion on the project, citing its concerns for effects on protected salmon and trout habitats and additional information on contaminants stirred up by dredging operations.

"Over the past 18 months, we've completed a major scientific review and analysis, created a new computer model for the estuary, validated previous analyses, and received tremendous help from the independent Sustainable Ecosystems Institute's science panel," said Mike Tehan, head of the fisheries service's habitat branch in Portland. "By working closely with the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Corps, we're confident that these new biological opinions use the best available science throughout."

The lower Columbia River and estuary provide important habitat to 13 populations of salmon and trout protected under the Endangered Species Act. These fish habitats have been greatly altered by changes in river flows, loss of wetlands and flood plain habitats, river channelization and the

introduction of non-native species. Similar changes have affected protected wildlife, including the Columbian white-tailed deer and the bald eagle.

“Our primary goal in looking at this project” noted Tehan, “was to make sure that lower-river habitat wouldn’t become further degraded because of the project. We’ve put in place tough requirements to minimize the project’s effects and ensure, in the long term, that those protections stay in place.”

“We know from our analysis that the project isn’t likely to further degrade important fish habitat in the long term,” said Kemper McMaster, the Fish and Wildlife Service’s state supervisor in Oregon. “However, we’re expecting there will be some minor, short-term effects on fish and their habitats. That makes it even more important that we continue to monitor the lower Columbia River and estuary to determine if there are any unanticipated, long-term effects and to correct them if they occur.”

Monitoring will track the project’s effects on wetlands and on shallow- and deep-water fish habitats; fish stranding from ship wakes; changes to the river’s salinity, velocity, depth, temperature and contaminant concentrations, and the amount of sediment dredged. There are provisions in the biological opinions for altering the project, depending on the results of the monitoring.

“This has been one of the most detailed, intensively analyzed, and thoroughly science-based biological opinions we’ve ever done,” said the fisheries service’s Lohn. “We’re very enthusiastic about the monitoring and adaptive management provisions called for in the biological opinions. Monitoring will validate our scientific findings and adaptive management will let us modify the the project, if unanticipated events occur.”

In addition to ensuring the project will not jeopardize listed fish and wildlife, the fish and wildlife agencies worked closely with the Corps of Engineers and Columbia River Ports to identify important ecosystem research and restoration actions. Restoration actions are proposed in numerous locations in the estuary and lower river that will assist with restoration of tidal marsh, forest, and shallow water habitats for salmon and trout. These include shallow water habitat creation at Miller/Pillar Islands, new riparian forest at Bachelor Slough, and restoration of tidal marsh habitats through the estuary with the purple loosestrife project.

“The Corps has included important research and restoration actions in their proposal,” said Anne Badgley, director of the Fish and Wildlife Service’s six-state Pacific Region. “These restoration actions are not project mitigation but rather additional opportunities to benefit threatened and endangered species in the Columbia River basin.”

The project is expected to remove about 23 million cubic yards of river bottom from various parts of the channel as it is deepened. The deeper channel will allow larger and more heavily laden vessels to use lower Columbia River ports.

Additional information on the biological opinions may be found by visiting the National Marine Fisheries Service website at <http://www.nwr.noaa.gov> the Fish and Wildlife Service Oregon website at: <http://oregonfwo.fws.gov/> or the Corps of Engineers website at <https://www.nwp.usace.army.mil>

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses nearly 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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